

# **Punjab's classical music**

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**Inside the lesser known  
tradition of Punjab's classical  
music,  
from Harballabh music  
festival to the Patiala gharana**

The widespread public misconception that Punjab has not much to offer in classical art traditions is so far from the truth. A robust and flourishing classical music scene is part of this state's past and present.

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*Satguru Jagit Singh and Satguru Uday Singh*

Listening to the mellifluous strains of Ronu Majumdar's flute at Harballabh Sangeet Sammelan, I was enchanted. His renditions of Bageshwari Kanada, Khamaj Thumri, and Heer were an exquisite exploration of the melodies with the finer essence and beauty in full evidence. Vocalist Kaushiki Chakraborty enthralled with her Jog Kauns and Pahari Thumri, and rich creativity.

However, I was also a trifle dejected. Like so many music lovers, I had to make do with a YouTube livestream instead of attending the festival in person, as I have done several times in the past. Of course, virtual concerts are the norm now, but the pleasure and privilege of attending

India's oldest Hindustani classical music festival is altogether different.

Founder Baba Harivallabh began it in 1875 as a Sangeet Mela in memory of his guru, Baba Tulja Giri, on the latter's first death anniversary. The Harballabh aka Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan was declared 'Oldest Music Festival of India' by Limca Book of Records in National Record – 2013. The Government of India has recognised it as a National Festival. The Sammelan is organised annually by Baba Harballabh Sangeet Mahasabha.

Also, every time I have attended this Harballabh festival, listened to concerts by representatives of the great Patiala Gharana, which was birthed in Punjab, and recalled my visit to the amazing Sri Bhaini Sahib [in Ludhiana], a village where almost every child is taught classical music, I have marvelled at the great classical music traditions of Punjab.

Sri Bhaini Sahib is the headquarters of the Namdhari sect of Sikhism. However, here, every student, Namdhari or non-Namdhari, is taught music free of cost.

**The widespread public misconception that Punjab has not much by way to offer in such classical art traditions is so far from the truth. A robust and flourishing classical music scene is part of this state's past and present.**

Take the annual Harivallabh Sangeet Sammelan, in Jalandhar, which just celebrated its 146th edition. So far, hundreds of classical musicians — living legends and upcoming artistes — have performed at this prestigious festival.

These include Vishnu Digamber, Omkarnath Thakur, Vinayak Rao Patwardhan, Maula Baksh, Krishna Rao Shankar, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Salaamat Ali Khan, and Nazaakat Ali Khan. Post-Independence, the stalwarts featured include Bismillah Khan, Ravi Shankar, Vilayat Khan, Bhimsen Joshi, Shivkumar Sharma, Hariprasad Chaurasia, Gangubai Hangal, Parveen Sultana, Amjad Ali Khan, Krishan Maharaj, Ram Narain, Begum Akhtar besides Rajan-Sajan Mishra, Debu Chaudhury, Ashwani Bhide-Deshpande, Uday Bhawalkar, Rashid Khan, etc.

The attendees list includes Mahatma Gandhi [1919], governors, chief ministers, central ministers to MPs and MLAs from Punjab and adjoining states. For all its high-profile nature, laudably, this festival has given free entry to all! Visitors are also offered free *langar seva*.

Moreover, younger talents also receive a platform. The Mahasabha President, Purnima Beri, and Festival Director SS Ajimal told us they hold an annual music competition, in four categories, for under-25 musicians, prior to the Sammelan. The winners perform on the Harballabh stage the following year. The organisers add that, earlier, it was only music lovers and industrialists of the region who helped in organising the festival. Later, government departments like North Zone Cultural Centre and Punjab Heritage and Tourism Promotion Board also extended help and now, so does the local administration.

The tradition of a three-day Sammelan in December has been unbroken, except for 1985 to 1989 [years of violence/unrest in Punjab], when symbolic performances were held during daytime for one day only.



*Kaushiki Chakraborty [vocalist] with her accompanists Ishaan Ghosh [Tabla] and Milind Kulkarni [Harmonium]*

Then there is the Patiala Gharana, a revered school of music which has produced a long line of illustrious exponents. The Patiala-Kasur gharana traces its foundations to the mid to late 19th century. The founder was musician Mian Kallu, who had trained under the last Mughal court musician Mir Qutub Baksh aka Tanras Khan of Delhi Gharana. Later, Mian Kallu became court musician to the Maharaja of Patiala, hence the gharana name. This gharana was later popularised by his son Ali Baksh and Baksh's close friend Fateh Ali Khan: the famous musician-duo Ali-a-Fattu. Their efforts popularised the gharana throughout the Indian subcontinent. Ustad Kale Khan was another outstanding



representative. However, its most famous was Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, a *towering* figure in Indian classical music.

We asked a representative of this gharana, Iman Das, a widely acclaimed vocalist and A-grade artist of All India Radio and Doordarshan, about the gharana's characteristics. Das has been recently acknowledged by WNYR New York radio in the 'World's Top Emerging Artists' category, and a documentary on him by a National Award-winning production house, titled *Omkar: The Sound of the Soul* is set to release in 2022.

He explains: "Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan Sahab took many elements from Gwalior, Agra, Delhi, and even from Dhrupad styles of the Dagars and blended these beautifully with the Patiala gharana essence to make it a formidable style of singing. The features of the gharana are long *meends*, heavy *gamaks*, electrifying *taans*, *shuddha aakar*, *bol-banavat*, and some elements of Punjabi folk interspersed with surprise elements like *murkis* and *harkats*. Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali used to say about the art of music: '*Yeh tho hawa ke saath khelna hai. Hawa kisiki kabu mein nahi rahta*'. It was as if he was painting a beautiful picture with his singing."

Iman adds that despite the icon's great efforts and exquisite raga renditions, what continues to be "a stamp of the gharana is its exquisite bouquet of thumris. Ustadji and his brother Ustad Barkat Ali Khan gave birth to some evergreen thumris, and subsequently, the modern ghazal style of singing through their legendary disciples like Ghulam Ali and Akhtari Bai, who used to accompany the Ustads on the harmonium."

The Patiala Gharana exponent Iman goes on to say that "among contemporary musicians, no one can deny that they have been influenced by the Patiala *gayaki* of thumris, and this is evident from the fact that '*Yaad Piye ke Aye*' and '*Aye Na Balam*' have almost become anthems for classical musicians currently as a mode of popular presentation after a raga presentation from any gharana!"



*Iman Das*

Of course, there is also the amazing Sri Bhaini Sahib, a village where every child is taught classical music in an over-century-old tradition. It is probably the only village of its kind in India. The children receive training in classical music, vocal and/or instrumental, along with their formal education. Hence, virtually, everyone in the village is knowledgeable about music, and definitely, everyone is a good listener.

As the chief organiser of all music-related activities, Balwant Singh, who is also a practising musician, says: “Yes, most children in the village receive training in vocal or instrumental classical music alongside formal

academics. In fact, Indian classical music is part of the curriculum in the village school named after our Namdhari Satguru Pratap Singh ji — SPS Academy.”

In a way, the music tradition here is much older. As the village representatives point out, music has been a part of Sikh daily routine since the days of Guru Nanak [15th century], and the entire Gurbani verses in Sri Guru Granth Sahib are metered to Indian classical ragas.

Since the mid-1920s, the tradition of formal training took shape under the tutelage of Satguru Pratap Singh ji [1890-1959], who believed music should permeate every Sikh child’s life. The tradition reached a pinnacle during the time of Satguru Jagjit Singh [1959-2012] and continues to flourish under the guidance of Satguru Uday Singh.

Great musicians have visited Sri Bhaini Sahib, and praised its cultural legacy. These include Omkarnath Thakur, Ram Narayan, Amjad Ali Khan, Vilayat Khan, Kishan Maharaj, Rajan-Sajan Mishra, Shivkumar Sharma, Birju Maharaj, Allarakha Khan, Zakir Hussain, Yogesh Samsi, Ajoy Chakraborty, Kaushiki Chakraborty, etc.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Sri Bhaini Sahib itself has produced several artistes who have garnered fame for themselves and their village. Sangeet Natak Akademi awardee Harbhajan Singh, one of Amjad Ali Khan's first students, is a renowned sitarist and vocalist. He also learned vocals from Mahadev Prasad Kathak of Jaipur Gharana, and has taught and mentored many students in the presence of Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji at Sri Bhaini Sahib from the early 1980s till date.

He has trained four generations of students in both Gurbani Kirtan and Indian classical music. Gurdev Singh, based in UK, a student of Amjad Ali Khan is a well-known sarod player and educationist. Dharambir Singh, also UK-based, a student of Vilayat Khan, is a reputed sitarist who has mentored many reputed musicians himself, and been honoured with the MBE by the Queen of England, along with being an MA, FTCL, NESTA fellow.

Another child of the village, Sukhwinder Singh trained under Nihal Singh and Kishan Maharaj, and is now a renowned player of *jori pakhawaj/tabla*. Balwant Singh, student of Satguru Jagjit Singh, Ustad Vilayat Khan, and Ustad Harbhajan Singh, is perhaps the only known vocal exponent today of Talwandi Gharan,a and also

proficient in Gurbani Kirtan. Kirpal Singh Panesar learnt *taar shehnai* from Bismillah Khan, and became a famous player of *taar shehnai/esraj*.

What were the challenges faced by these traditions in the past, and now from COVID-19? The 146<sup>th</sup> Harballabh Sangeet Sammelan was held minus the Annual Sangeet Sammelan. Also, instead of the pandal, the venue was indoors — Baba Harivallabh Bhawan — and attended by few hundred music lovers every day. This was compensated by online viewership. This year, as well as for the last four to five years, the views from online streaming ran into lakhs. In 2020, the Sammelan was one-day festival, owing to COVID-19.

The Patiala Gharana artists, of course, following the worldwide trend, had to make do with online concerts and social media to promote and perform their music. Das says the Patiala-Kasur style is an extremely complex style to learn and calls for rigorous *riyaz* for years adding: "Hence in this era, where students want quick results, the khayal style of Patiala is not as popular, and there are few practitioners. However, the thumris and ghazals, albeit in not such a grand style as the past, continue to rule among the masses."

Sri Bhaini Sahib's children continue to learn as before but students from outside the village and abroad [who used to come for classes] are learning online. How are they sustaining sponsorship over the decades for teachers' fees, purchase of musical instruments etc? Quoting their guru, Balwant Singh says: "Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji would remark that 'this is like Langar, the community kitchen of music'. It is supported with his blessings and contributions in kind, and otherwise from the community."

Evidently, Punjab's great music traditions will continue to flourish.

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